

Faiths come together to aid nature

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Body

"We are saving Noah's cargo,

We are saving Noah's cargo,

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Children of the earth."

- Sung by the Rev. Fred Small, Bloomington, October, 2001.

The birth of a faith-based movement to foster responsible stewardship of "God's creation" is under way.

Kickoff of the effort in the Twin Cities came with an appearance by the Rev. Fred Small, co-chair of Religious Witness for the Earth, at an ecumenical service at Illinois Wesleyan University earlier this month.

Christians, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims gathered at Evelyn Chapel for "An Interfaith Expression of Environmental Spirituality." They heard Small describe how his recently formed organization uses non-violent tactics to urge action on environmental issues.

Major concerns include global warming, which even a reluctant President Bush now acknowledges as a scientific fact, Small said.

"The greatest long-term threat to America's national security is not terrorism, but environmental degradation," said Small, a Unitarian minister and former lawyer based in Littleton, Mass.

"Global climate change and environmental toxification confronts us with the possibility, and perhaps the probability, the human race will achieve its own extinction in the next few centuries," he said.

America went to war in a quick and decisive response to the events of Sept. 11.

"But, on the environmental front, we have yet to prove we are capable of responding to a threat that is gradual, incremental, diffuse, profound, long-term and potentially catastrophic," he said.

"The prognosis on global climate change is not good. Freak storms, floods, wild fires, freezes, heat waves and drought have already left thousands homeless and hungry around the world.

"In the Arctic, huge ice flows break off. ... Spring arrives a full two weeks earlier to the Northern Hemisphere than it did just 20 years ago.

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"In 50 years there will be no glaciers in Glacier National Park. The snows of Kilimanjaro will be fable, not fact. Some say polar bears are already doomed to extinction."

Small cited a U.N. study of top world scientists who recently predicted global temperature will rise as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit this century.

"The reality of global climate change is no longer in doubt."

Still, global climate change is just one of several current environmental worries. Others are degradation of habitat, sprawling urban development, nuclear waste, and the loss of plant and animal species at alarming rates, he said.

Making matters worse is this: the poor around the globe are "nature's first victims" and the most vulnerable to catastrophe, he said.

Small insisted religions around the world must take the lead to find solutions.

"Every religious tradition teaches us to hold sacred the wonders of creation. ... Every religious tradition cautions us to temper our craving for material things. ... Every religious tradition forbids theft, yet every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and their children."

Religious Witness for the Earth was formed in February. Just a few months later, 22 people, including 10 clergy, were arrested for blocking the entrance to the U.S. Energy Department in Washington, D.C.

Like Gandhi's success using non-violence to free India from the British, Small hopes a faith-based organization can use peaceful means to motivate an array of religious networks on behalf of the environment.

"I cannot promise we will prevail or the human race will endure. The doctor tends her patient even though she knows the patient will die, sooner if not later. All life ends and yet we act, we love," Small said.

IWU physics professor Narendra Jaggi is working to organize a interfaith group in the Twin Cities to work on environmental causes.

Why turn to religion for help?

"Short answer, everything else has failed," said Jaggi, who was born Hindu. "Purely political organizations have run into a wall. What we need is to tap peoples' core values.

"Virtually every religious group has as its religious practice a renewing of the earth. Every religion struggles with this issue.

"Man's dominion over the earth puts us above the earth. But, dominion also means you are a shepherd. It is an obligation.

"Hindus make no distinction between life forms. There is a need to recover a religion that puts man and nature back together."

For more information on the local interfaith organizing project on behalf of the environment phone (309) 556-3418 or e-mail njaggi@iwu.edu or gknapp@mail.mtco.com.

Learn about Religious Witness for the Environment at www.religiouswitness.org.

Learn more about religions of the world and the ecology at [http:](http://)

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